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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DHAKA 002739

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TAGS: KDEM PGOV BG
SUBJECT: FORMER PRESIDENT CALLS HOUSE FIRE BNP
ASSASSINATION ATTEMPT

Classified By: A/DCM D.C. McCullough, reason para 1.4 d.

¶1. (C) Summary. Former president B. Chowdhury and his son Mahi label the mysterious early morning fire that enveloped three areas of their Dhaka home an assassination attempt by BNP elements fearful of their party's allegedly growing popularity. BNP desire to deter the defection of restless parliamentary back-benchers might be a more compelling motive. Combined with the growing controversy over the grossly flawed voter list (septel), it seems that the rough and tumble of the election campaign is already upon us. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) In the early morning of April 30, fire broke out at the home of former president and breakaway BNP leader B. Chowdhury, who launched in 2004 the Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh "alternative stream" party. The house is in the Baridhara area of the diplomatic enclave and is on the same street as two Embassy residences. Chowdhury, his wife, his son Mahi, and Mahi's wife and two small children were home but escaped injury. Several days later, a fire brigade official told the press that the fire was not rpt not caused by an electrical problem. According to the Chowdhurys, they had lived in the house since they built it in 1986, it was not insured, and it will probably be torn down to build a new house.

¶3. (SBU) On May 14, A/DCM met with the Chowdhurys at their Baridhara home. The Chowdhurys are staying with relatives but still receive visitors in the garage of their former home. They asserted they have no doubt that the fire was arson. Entering the home, they pointed out what they said were three separate fire areas: one that seemed to start with drapes in the downstairs living room, and that had burned much of the furniture and blackened the ceiling and walls; a second area near a window in the adjacent dining room; and the third in a second-floor bathroom and closet area on the other side of the house.

¶4. (SBU) In the first two downstairs areas, the Chowdhurys noted melted plastic and wall-mounted air conditioners as an indicator of intense heat from the fire. In the upstairs area, they pointed to burn marks on a door and the wall which stopped mid-way down to the floor; they speculated that an incendiary liquid had been sprayed from a small high window at the end of the room. Moving to the wraparound second-floor balcony, they pointed to a small metal see-saw that was leaning against the exterior bathroom wall window as the way an arsonist could have gained access to the window. The seesaw, they said, is normally part of a play area around the corner and had not been placed by them in this new position. They noted that a skeleton construction site for an adjacent building, with an open concrete floor literally

inches away from one side of the balcony railing, could have been the bridge for an attacker to enter their property from the rear unobserved from the front.

¶15. (SBU) Mahi, BDB's only MP, stated that he became aware of the fire when the maid, who lived downstairs near the garage, called him on a house intercom, evidence, he said, that the house's electricity was still on. It was approximately 0535.

Alerting the rest of his family, they traversed "fire balls" lapping the circular stairway and blinding smoke to escape onto the street, where Mahi hailed a passing RAB patrol which returned in approximately 10 minutes with the fire brigade. By that point, the downstairs fires had already been extinguished by locals, but the fire brigade put out the upstairs fire.

¶16. (C) The lone police guard on duty at the home was in the garage and claimed to have seen and heard nothing, and was likely asleep, the Chowdhurys said. The fire brigade official who stated that an electrical problem was not the cause of the fire now told them that he expects now to lose his job, while police have promised but have yet started their own investigation. The police, Mahi said, have tried to blame the fire on their maid but cannot come up with a motivation. Nothing is missing from the house, and the \$1500 that was locked in a suitcase in the upstairs closet was clearly destroyed by the fire.

¶17. (C) The Chowdhurys blamed the fire on BNP elements who, they said, fear BDB's growing political popularity in the run-up to the next election. They noted the prior attacks on BDB tied to the BNP, and said that they have continued to receive written and telephonic threats. As evidence of a BDG cover-up, they pointed to Home Minister of State Babar's

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statement in parliament that the fire began at 0520, or about ten minutes after sunup. The significance, they said, is that the hour before sunup is a traditional striking time for political assassinations (e.g. General Zia) because people are well asleep. They claimed that tea-stalls in the area that are normally open 24/7 were mysteriously shut down for the night of the fire. The Chowdhurys have received condolences and visits from almost all political parties, including IOJ in the BNP's ruling coalition, but not from BNP, even though the PM's brother, an MP, lives two doors away and Baridhara's MP comes from the BNP.

¶18. (SBU) The Chowdhurys stated that they plan to travel soon to the U.S. and the UK to publicize their cause.

¶19. (C) Comment: Anything is possible in the turbulent and cutthroat world of Bangladeshi politics, but it seems unlikely that B. Chowdhury would have burned his own house and risked injury to his grandchildren for 15 minutes of BNP bashing. Moreover, it is true that BNP elements burned down a factory owned by Chowdhury's principal financial backer and fellow BNP defector, Major Manan, who was the losing candidate in the flagrantly rigged Dhaka 10 by-election in 2004. BDB, as far as we can tell, has not caught fire politically and gets noticed only when it is the victim of an attack or a disrupted rally, so it's hard to believe BNP fear its electoral impact. However, what BNP does fear is more defections from its parliamentary back-benches, especially in the aftermath of the threat from BNP old guard leader Oli Ahmad to decamp with supposedly all BNP MPs from Chittagong if the BNP does not take unspecified action against "corruption." (In fact, Ahmad's grievances are more pointed and include disdain for BNP heir apparent Tarique Rahman. In an April meeting with us, he explicitly ruled out joining the "inconsequential" BDB.) Thus, the Chowdhury house fire could have been a warning shot to wavering BNP MPs. Septel reports the growing controversy over what appears to be a grossly inflated and manipulated voter list. The rough and tumble of the election campaign has already begun.

CHAMMAS